

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

8 February 1966

STAFF MEMORANDUM NO. 5-66

SUBJECT: Possible Effects of Various Bombing Programs Against
the DRV

1. In this memorandum we examine the advantages and disadvantages of three different bombing programs against the DRV. We weigh these programs against two primary US objectives: interdicting the movement of men and materiel to South Vietnam, inflicting enough damage to force from the DRV political concessions in return for an end to the bombings. In addition, we consider the effects of each program only in the short run, over a period of up to 10 weeks. In order to isolate the pluses and minuses of each program, we have made two assumptions: that no major change occurs in the net result of combat with the Viet Cong, and that stated US political terms remain unaltered.

2. The three assumed bombing programs are:

- (1) a program along the lines of the pre-pause pattern
- (2) a program concentrating on LOCs in the southern DRV
- (3) a much expanded program, exempting only population targets and sources of food supplies.

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Excluded from automatic
downgrading and
declassification

General Considerations

3. With respect to the first US objective, we do not believe that even the most extensive bombing program would prevent the movement of men and supplies to the South in quantities sufficient to sustain or even increase the scale of VC/PAVN activity. Our best judgment is that an average of about 12 tons ^{from outside sources} ~~was required~~ ^{by} ~~has been supplied~~ to the VC/PAVN ^{forces} over the past year. This may be somewhat misleading, since the requirements probably have expanded considerably as more men have been infiltrated and as the VC have been forced into combat by US forces. Even so, the total amount of material required by the VC/PAVN is well below the capability of the supply lines under the kind of bombing program in effect during 1965. The principal effect of the different levels of bombings probably should be measured in terms of slowing down the supply effort, ~~disrupting~~ schedules and operational planning, raising the cost to the DRV, and setting a ceiling on future expansion of the supply rate.

4. With respect to the second US objective, which bears on the DRV's will to sustain the war, the various US bombing programs might have significantly different effects. These differences are discussed below. But we feel it should be strongly emphasized

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that all these bombing programs would be a secondary factor in the DRV's attitude, as long as the results of combat in South Vietnam persuade the North Vietnamese leaders that ultimate success is still possible. Only when they begin to have doubts about such an estimate will the bombing, and the question of paying a political price for its cessation, become significant factors in their calculations.

Course I. The program would be roughly the same as the pre-pause pattern: armed reconnaissance, plus strikes against fixed targets throughout the DRV, but not including the industrial complex, POL or population centers. Presumably, the Hanoi-Haiphong "sanctuary" would remain and there would be a limit on attacks closer than 30 nm from the Chinese border.

5. The record of the last year is a loud and clear argument against this course in terms of accomplishing the two US objectives. ~~24,000~~ ^{against targets in the DRV} The US conducted about 24,000 sorties, but infiltration nevertheless increased, and the DRV reaction to the last pause indicates a continuing determination not to make any concessions to halt bombings.

It can be argued that the effects of bombing ~~are~~ cumulative and that only the phase beginning last October represented a full test of this pattern. But we think it highly doubtful that the pre-pause pattern would move the US much closer to its objectives.

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6. It is likely that the DRV and Chinese expect a much heavier and extensive program from the US. In rejecting recent US diplomatic overtures, the DRV probably has already decided to try to absorb an enlarged program. Resumption of the pre-pause level, therefore, would probably be encouraging. The chances of a major reaction are thus quite small. The Soviets too are probably prepared to cope with the political and military problems stemming from at least the pre-pause pattern of bombing. They too are likely to be somewhat relieved and would avoid any radical new steps because of this US course. Thus, the US probably would not be incurring any new risks.

7. This program would have the advantage of damaging both the network supporting the infiltration trails and the supply lines into the DRV. But neither would feel the maximum weight of a sustained US attack. Moreover, the northernmost targets and particularly the Haiphong-Hanoi rail line would be heavily defended. US casualties would be relatively high. There would be a risk of chance engagements with Chinese fighters and the chance of an air war with the DRV would rise, though these contingencies still seem unlikely. Nevertheless, under this program, the US would have to allow for the possibility of

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having to attack airfields and SAM sites near to Hanoi or Haiphong, even if the original program had not included these targets.

8. World opinion would be alarmed by this program, and various pressures for another pause would grow. If this pre-pause pattern emerged soon, while US diplomatic efforts at the UN or elsewhere were in train, some of the credibility of the US political position would be dissipated.

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Course II. This program would limit the bombing to the area of the DRV south of the 20th parallel. It would call for a sustained attack including night bombing. It would also be accompanied by bombing in Laos and a maximum effort against coastal shipping.

9. The principal advantage of this course would be the opportunity to concentrate the full weight of the American air attack at the narrowest and therefore most critical juncture of the supply line into South Vietnam. No matter how many shipments come across China or by sea, the military and other material for the Vietcong ultimately must be infiltrated by sea, through Cambodia, or be sent into Military Region IV and then through Laos. To maintain the effort through Laos the DRV now has about 40,000 men in Military Region IV, and to sustain them requires tonnages in excess of the amount ultimately sent into South Vietnam. [REDACTED] that the total re- 25X1X4
quirements for this southern area are growing. The gross target for air attacks may be as little as 24,000 tons or as large as 50,000 tons over a 90 day period, even though only very small percent may go forward into South Vietnam.

10. This bombing program could not prevent the transport of supplies at present levels to VC/PAVN forces in South Vietnam. It probably could not prevent some further increase in the rate of shipment. It could, however, put a ceiling on future rates.

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This is true of all the programs assumed in this memorandum, but we think that, in the short run, the one considered here probably would impose a lower ceiling than would the others, if at the same time the Communists were prevented from expanding shipments by sea or through Cambodia.

11. So long as VC/PAVN requirements remained below this ceiling, the main effect of the program would be to slow down and disrupt supplies and increase the strain of putting men and material into the pipeline. Considering the VC/PAVN penchant for long and detailed planning of offensive operations, the irregularity of deliveries and doubt as to the reliability of resupply might lead to the postponement or cancellation of certain planned operations. These effects would be felt more immediately under this program than under alternatives which concentrated on overall DRV capabilities to support the war.

12. In addition, this course of action would be the least risky in terms of possible DRV, Chinese or Soviet responses. Air defense in this area is conventional AAA and it is unlikely that the SAM system could be effectively extended this far south. It is also unlikely that the DRV would risk its fighter force to protect this area, particularly since Hanoi could never be sure whether US bombings would again be extended to the northern areas.

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13. Another political advantage might be the effect of this more limited program on world opinion. It could be convincingly defended as directly supporting the war effort in South Vietnam. The US probably has gained in world opinion from the pause; the resumption inevitable dissipates some of this credit. As it became clear that the US had not resumed in order to strike at economic and civilian targets, it might be possible to retain some of this political capital and perhaps encourage some third parties to continue probing for negotiating terms from Hanoi. Finally, a limited program would be a lesser commitment of prestige and would be easier to terminate or interrupt should the occasion arise.

14. Among the important disadvantages to this course would be the grant of immunity to the northern area of the DRV. Hanoi would almost certainly use the respite to build up air defense against any extension of the bombing. Imports of all material, particularly critical items such as POL, could be stepped up; stockpiles could be created and dispersal of key items could proceed unhindered. Thus, the DRV could without much cost increase the rate of supplies funneled southward, and perhaps more than offset any reduction caused by the concentrated US air attack in Military Region IV.

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15. In terms of the second US objective, affecting the DRV's will to persist, this course of action would have little effect. The fact that the US has adopted a limited program might be interpreted as a symptom of weakness, reflecting either fear of Chinese intervention or pressure from domestic and world opinion. Economic life in most of the DRV would be unaffected and the political leaders would have less concern about morale.

16. This program might be supplemented by occasional attacks upon the northern part of the DRV. If these were restricted to a scale and frequency which detracted only marginally from the weight of attack below the 20th parallel, they would not have the full effects of Course III, but they would serve certain limited ends. They would prevent the DRV from concentrating its anti-aircraft artillery in the southern part of the country. Attacks of this kind on rail lines and roads would require the North Vietnamese to remain in a state of alert and to limit daylight operations. Destruction of a single valuable installation, such as a modern industrial plant well away from Hanoi and Haiphong or the large POL storage facility at Haiphong, would warn of subsequent escalation and, in the case of the POL dump, destroy the most crucial of the economic facilities related to the infiltration effort.

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Course III. This program would be a greatly expanded bombing of all categories of targets except population centers and food supplies. It would include power plants, ~~POL~~ storage facilities, and about 30 transportation targets, mainly around Hanoi, Haiphong and the rail lines to China.

17. With respect to the objective of interdiction, we doubt that this program would be as effective in the short run as the one outlined in Course II. Many of the added targets (e.g. power plants) are only indirectly involved in the infiltration effort. Furthermore, reserve supplies of POL would go far to cushion the immediate impact. We estimate that about one month's normal supply (an average of 15,000 in 1965) is in the distribution system or in dispersed or concealed storage and therefore untargetable.

18. With respect to the DRV's resolve, this program would confront the Hanoi regime with much greater problems and dangers than would Courses I and II. It would signal an intention to reduce the DRV to virtually a subsistence economy and would probably lead the DRV leaders to give greater weight to the chances that, in a subsequent stage, the US would go even farther, e.g. attacks on cities, invasion, use of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, if we continue to assume no major change in the military prospects within South Vietnam, in our judgment Hanoi would not respond by offering concessions; almost certainly it would not do so within the first ten weeks or so.

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19. This program, however, would run a high risk of counter-action by the Communist side. Since almost all important targets would come under attack, the chances are good that the DRV would use its fighters. For example, an attack on POL storage at Phuoc Yen would almost certainly be resisted. If DRV fighters were destroyed, the North Vietnamese leaders might believe the time had come to call on China for air support. The pressures on the USSR to take a decisive stand would also grow. World opinion would almost certainly be highly alarmed, and there would probably be unfavorable political intervention by third parties to stop the bombings.

20. Another disadvantage would be that sustained bombing at this level would greatly narrow future US options. If we are correct in believing that, at least in the short run, a positive response from Hanoi is highly unlikely, then a further set of decisions would be required. International tensions would be high, as would the pressures for another pause. But if the program were interrupted, the DRV would utilize the pause to repair much of the damage. Thereafter, the US would be confronted with the question of resumption and, since the Course III program had proved unavailing, of resumption at yet a higher level, such as attacks on

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population centers. At this extreme level, the risks of Chinese or even Soviet intervention would be much higher, and world reaction would almost certainly be totally hostile.

21. On balance, the Course II program of concentrating on the DRV's southern provinces, in conjunction with a program of bombing in Laos, offers the most immediate chance, although not a very great one, of limiting and disrupting support to the Viet Cong at the lowest risk. It would also retain much of the political credit built up by the pause. It would not visit upon the DRV the kind of destruction which might possibly lead Hanoi to question the wisdom of continuing the conflict. But it would be the easiest from which to advance to higher levels gradually, or to interrupt without much cost should the occasion arise.

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